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DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Combating desertification and drought

Report of the Secretary-General

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted in accordance with General Assembly resolution 46/161 of 19 December 1991, entitled "Combating desertification and drought", in which the Secretary-General was requested, in the light of the decisions of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) regarding desertification and drought, to highlight any requirements necessary to implement those decisions in a report to be submitted to the Assembly at its forty-seventh session.

II. BACKGROUND

2. In September 1977, the United Nations Conference on Desertification adopted the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification, which was subsequently approved by the General Assembly in resolution 32/172 of 19 December 1977. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was designated as the lead agency to coordinate the implementation and follow-up of the Plan of Action.

3. In resolution 33/88 of 15 December 1978 on the measures to be taken for the benefit of the Sudano-Sahelian region, the General Assembly designated the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO), to function on behalf of UNEP as the arm of the United Nations system responsible for assisting the efforts of a number of countries situated south of the Sahara to implement the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification.

4. Concerned by negative trends in status of land resources throughout the world, particularly in the developing countries, the Economic and Social Council adopted resolution 1991/97 of 26 July 1991, which addressed the desertification problem in South Asia. In it, the Council requested the Secretary-General to undertake a study to assess the extent of the problem and its effects on the peoples of the region and to provide a framework to tackle the problem. A report outline was submitted to the Council at its substantive session of 1992. The full study is under preparation by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) with contributions from UNEP and UNDP, and will be available in 1993.

5. In subsequent resolutions, the General Assembly took note of the measures taken to implement the Plan of Action, including those within the Sudano-Sahelian region, and expressed concern over the continuing spread and intensification of desertification in developing countries, particularly those in Africa, and on the lack of adequate financing to address the problem.

6. In its resolution 44/228 of 22 December 1989 on the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the General Assembly listed the "Protection and management of land resources by, inter alia, combating deforestation, desertification and drought" as one of the environmental issues of major concern in maintaining the quality of the Earth's environment and especially in achieving environmentally sound and sustainable development in

all countries. This was confirmed during the UNCED process, where desertification and drought were considered as representing key global environmental problems, and as priority areas for developing countries, particularly those in Africa.

7. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 3 to 14 June 1992, was the first major international effort to address the two issues of environment and development together. According to General Assembly resolution 44/228, the Conference was to elaborate strategies and measures to halt and reverse the effects of environmental degradation in the context of increased national and international efforts to promote sustainable and environmentally sound development in all countries.

8. The desertification issue was given priority consideration by the Preparatory Committee for the Conference, particularly at its fourth session, where draft chapter 12 of Agenda 21 was discussed and adopted.

9. Regional and subregional organizations have played a leading role in efforts to combat desertification and the effects of drought and in promoting increased attention to the issue in the context of UNCED.

10. There are several intergovernmental organizations in Africa whose mandates involve desertification and drought, namely the Permanent Inter-State Committee on Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS), in West Africa, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD), in East Africa, the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) and the Arab Maghreb Union. The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), as the regional arm of the United Nations, has been active in the preparation of reports and in policy preparation and has played a coordinating and advisory role. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Ministerial Conference for a joint policy to combat desertification (COMIDES), as well as the African Development Bank and more recently the Arab Maghreb Union all participated actively at the policy and planning levels.

11. In East and South Asia, a major role is played by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), in close cooperation with UNEP. A Regional Network of Research and Training Centres for Desertification Control in Asia and the Pacific (DESCONAP) was established through ESCAP, UNDP, UNEP and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and 19 countries have joined and designated focal points. Major desert research centres in China, India, Iran and Turkmenistan are also focusing on assessing and monitoring desertification, and an additional centre is being established in the Gobi Desert of Mongolia. Activities will be expanded to other parts of the region. Major attention is being paid to the development of a united and reliable desertification assessment methodology, the training of specialists in the region and interregional information exchange.

12. In West Asia, a major role is being played by the Arab Centre for the Study of Arid Zones and Drylands (ACSAD) in cooperation with the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), whose activities also cover the Arab countries of North Africa. In cooperation with numerous national research centres, particular attention is being paid to the assessment and monitoring of soil degradation, the development of soil conservation measures and hydrological mapping. The Network might be considered as a basic nucleus for the regional implementation of Agenda 21. 1/

13. In Latin America, the situation is less clear, perhaps because drought and desertification problems are less severe. An attempt has been made to organize an efficient regional anti-desertification network based on the Institute of Dryland Studies in Mendoza, Argentina. So far, however, this centre does not have regional standing, although it is active in training in and promoting anti-desertification technologies. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has to some extent been involved in desertification problems, and the Chaco Arid Zones Network, the Network on Afforestation and the Dendro-energy Network were established with ECLAC assistance. This is changing under the impetus of the coordination by UNEP of activities involving also FAO and individual Governments.

14. In cooperation with the United Nations regional commissions, other specialized regional networks have been established, such as the Network on Sand Dune Fixation in North Africa and the Middle East; the NGO Network on Research and Information Development of Sustainable Livelihoods in the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands in Africa and the Watershed Management Network in the countries covered by SADCC.

15. UNEP plays a major role in supporting and coordinating sensitization activities, seminars and training courses related to desertification prevention and control. At the international level, UNEP was given the task of following up and coordinating the implementation of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification and assisting Governments to implement the Plan. The Inter-Agency Working Group on Desertification (IAWGD) was established to assist UNEP with this task and the Consultative Group for Desertification Control (DESCON) to help in mobilizing resources.

16. Within UNDP, UNSO, in collaboration with UNEP, has been active in dealing with drought and desertification problems specifically in the Sudano-Sahelian region. The Office has been working with drought-related problems since 1973 and with desertification since 1977 in developing programmes and projects and in mobilizing resources for the implementation of activities. Through a joint venture agreement, since 1978, support has been provided by UNEP and UNDP to UNSO for the implementation of the Plan of Action in the Sudano-Sahelian region. UNDP's country programmes fund natural resource management programmes in arid and dry areas of many countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Near East. Emphasis is on increasing productivity of dryland ecosystems through resource conservation. Activities include those related to agriculture, watershed management, dune stabilization and fodder and fuelwood production and management. There is close coordination with specialized

agencies and with UNSO in the Sudano-Sahelian region. UNDP's Africa 2000 programme focuses on natural resource management issues in many people-oriented projects executed by community-based groups.

17. In recognition of the experience of UNSO, the General Assembly, in paragraph 8 of its resolution 46/161, invited UNSO to assist in organizing sectoral/thematic round tables in order to mobilize adequate resources for the protection and sound management of natural resources to arrest and reverse the process of desertification.

18. Numerous other initiatives have been undertaken in relation to the issue by various agencies, such as FAO, international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, and non-governmental organizations, such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN).

19. Mention must also be made of the French initiative to establish the Sahara and Sahel Observatory (OSS). This initiative, begun in 1989, aims to give new impetus to drought and desertification control efforts by strengthening and expanding the range of existing observation structures in groups of countries in North, East and West Africa and encouraging networking and communication within the field.

20. Despite these initiatives, progress in implementing the plan has been modest, largely because of the overall lack of priority given to programmes to combat desertification and the resultant lack of adequate resources. The recurrence of deep and extreme drought from 1981 to 1984 and from 1990 to 1992 throughout much of Africa has contributed to the present worsening of the situation.

III. DECISIONS OF UNCED REGARDING DROUGHT AND DESERTIFICATION

A. Coverage of activities related to drought and desertification in Agenda 21

21. The General Assembly in its resolution 44/172 requested UNEP, among other things, to undertake a general evaluation of the progress achieved in implementing the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification for submission to UNCED. In response to that resolution, UNEP prepared a report entitled Status of Desertification and Implementation of the United Nations Plan of Action to Combat Desertification. 2/

22. According to the information collected by UNEP in 1991, the areas of drylands, by continents, expressed in millions of hectares were as follows:

Type of dryland	Africa	Asia	Australia	Europe	North America	South America	World total		Percentage
Hyper-arid	672	277	0	0	3	26	978		16
Arid	504	626	303	11	82	45	1 571)		
Semi-arid	514	693	309	105	419	265	2 305)	5 172	84
Dry sub-humid	269	353	51	184	232	207	1 296)		
Total	1 959	1 949	663	300	736	543	6 150		100
Percentage	32	32	11	5	12	8	100		

23. The above data show that more than 6.1 billion hectares or nearly 40 per cent of the Earth's land area, is dryland. Of this, about 0.9 billion hectares are hyper-arid lifeless deserts, mostly in Africa and South, West and Central Asia. The remaining 5.2 billion hectares are arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid lands that are the home and source of livelihood for about one sixth of the world's population, or around 900 million people. Sixty-four per cent of all global drylands are in Africa and Asia, being almost equally distributed between the two. In southern Europe there are 300 million hectares of dryland requiring special attention.

24. Of the 5.2 billion hectares of potentially productive drylands, 84 per cent are prone to drought and desertification. It is estimated that about 3.6 billion hectares, or 70 per cent of the total, are currently threatened by various forms of land degradation known as desertification, thus affecting the well-being and future of the people who live there.

25. These figures are only rough estimates showing the general picture of the world in respect of aridity, drought and desertification. For operational purposes, more accurate and reliable figures must be obtained, as recommended by the Governing Council of UNEP and then by UNCED in the relevant section of Agenda 21. 1/

26. In view of the particular severity of the problem of drought and desertification in the Sudano-Sahelian region, a special detailed study on this region was prepared by UNSO, entitled "Assessment of Desertification and Drought in the Sudano-Sahelian Region 1985-1991", which was issued separately in January 1992.

27. The report notes that the dryland environments of the Sudano-Sahelian region present formidable problems to sustainable development. Rainfall is limited and irregular, and water is a severe constraint on production. The drylands face three main environmental problems: unpredictable and at times severe drought; desiccation, or aridification due to chronic drought,

sometimes extending over decades; and dryland degradation, brought about mainly by inappropriate land use. The persistent droughts of the Sudano-Sahelian region severely affect annual crop yields, causing crop failures and, in extreme cases, famines. The great Sahelian drought of 1968 to 1973 actually became a prolonged drought lasting for almost 20 years and extending into the eastern Sudano-Sahelian region and southern Africa. This has resulted in problems of desiccation, over which populations have had little control, which have been aggravated by damaging land use systems and practices. With the return of the rains, rangelands have, however, shown resilience. Equilibrium-based paradigms of range management call for more flexible policies based on a new recognition of the resiliency of the rangelands as non-equilibrium ecosystems. Agricultural extension, on the other hand, continues to be a major problem, involving the spread of rainfed cropping to marginal lands more suited to pastoral economic systems.

28. The study calls for concerted action in the Sudano-Sahelian region to deal with the twin environmental problems of desertification and drought, including the promotion of alternative livelihood systems that could relieve pressure on the land and help alleviate poverty by providing alternative and supplementary sources of income. This action should take into account the findings of the study, including the need for new policies and additional resources to attain the objective of sustainable development under extremely difficult environmental conditions.

B. Chapter 12 of Agenda 21

29. The decisions of UNCED concerning drought and desertification issues are contained in chapter 12 of Agenda 21, 1/ which is entitled "Managing fragile ecosystems: combating desertification and drought". This chapter consists of six major programme areas, broken down into 36 major categories of activities aimed not only at alleviating the impact of desertification and drought in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas, but also at tackling the underlying causes, mainly poverty.

30. The chapter embodies the concerns of the 1977 Plan of Action to Combat Desertification, and can thus serve as the future frame of reference for anti-desertification activities.

31. The six programmes elaborated in chapter 12 call for international action and cooperation in such areas as the systematic observation of drought and desertification dynamics and exchange of relevant information, particularly on methodology and appropriate new technology; the advancement of science and technology; and the provision of financial support and technical assistance. The six programme areas are as follows:

(a) Strengthening the knowledge base and developing information and monitoring systems for regions prone to desertification and drought, including the economic and social aspects of these ecosystems;

(b) Combating land degradation through, inter alia, intensified soil conservation, afforestation and reforestation activities;

(c) Developing and strengthening integrated development programmes for the eradication of poverty and promotion of alternative livelihood systems in areas prone to desertification;

(d) Developing comprehensive anti-desertification programmes and integrating them into national development plans and national environmental planning;

(e) Developing comprehensive drought preparedness and drought-relief schemes, including self-help arrangements for drought-prone areas, and designing programmes to cope with environmental refugees;

(f) Encouraging and promoting popular participation and environmental education, focusing on desertification control and management of the effects of drought.

32. The chapter also sets out order-of-magnitude estimates of the average annual cost of implementing the activities in each programme area. The total annual financing required to implement chapter 12 is estimated to be in the order of US$ 12.2 billion, about half of which would have to be provided through external financing. As stated in Agenda 21, the actual costs and financial terms, including any that are non-concessional, will depend upon, inter alia, specific strategies and programmes Governments decide upon for implementation.

33. Chapter 12 also contains a number of recommendations to Governments in terms of the required scientific and technological means, human resource development and capacity-building. The chapter calls on all countries concerned to (a) develop national programmes of action for combating drought and desertification; (b) ensure that these programmes are an integrated part of the national plans for development and hence receive their share of national resources; (c) develop appropriate national machineries including scientific and technological facilities to address the issues; and (d) contribute to, and participate in, regional and international endeavours in this field.

C. Other relevant components of Agenda 21

34. Chapter 12 is closely interrelated with other chapters of Agenda 21. 1/ In particular, the chapters concerning social and economic dimensions of combating drought and desertification. Other relevant chapters are chapter 10, on the integrated approach to the planning and management of land resources; chapter 11, on combating deforestation; chapter 14, on promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development; and chapter 18, on the protection of the quality and supply of freshwater resources: application of integrated approaches to the development, management and use of water

resources. The general problems of environment and development, which are dealt with in the sections related to means of implementation of Agenda 21, also have direct impact on the issue under consideration.

IV. REQUIREMENTS AND ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21 IN THE AREAS OF DROUGHT AND DESERTIFICATION

A. Financing

35. One of the main problems that has hampered the implementation of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification adopted by the United Nations Conference on Desertification has been an overall lack of adequate funding for desertification control activities. This can largely be attributed to the overall lack of priority given to the issue by both Governments and donors, in spite of the worsening situation and the widespread emergencies caused by the severe droughts of the early 1980s. The funds allocated to drought and desertification activities are not commensurate with the scale of the problems.

36. According to the report on drought and desertification in the context of the United Nations Programme of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development 1986-1990, which was prepared by UNSO on the basis of inputs from UNEP, UNDP, FAO, UNESCO, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Bank, the level of total official development assistance (ODA) to Africa in 1987 was US$ 16 billion, of which an estimated US$ 550 million was devoted to drought and desertification. These sums are far from adequate in relation to the scale of the problems. As the UNCED process has dramatically raised the level of global awareness and acceptance of desertification and drought as the most serious problem of sustainable development facing many developing countries, particularly in Africa, it is hoped that the international community will strive to increase the volume of resources and level of assistance as recently demonstrated at the round table in Mauritania. In this regard, the General Assembly might consider calling for a percentage of the expected increase in ODA funds to be specifically allocated to activities related to desertification.

37. Owing to the current severity of the situation, the issue is now receiving increased attention, which has been heightened by the UNCED preparatory process and the Conference itself. It is expected that this will be reflected in an increase in available funding. UNCED identified various mechanisms through which the implementation of Agenda 21 1/ could be financed. They included:

(a) UNDP's country programmes and specially funded activities such as Capacity 21;

(b) The multilateral development banks and funds such as the International Development Association (IDA);

(c) The Global Environment Facility (GEF);

(d) Special bilateral assistance programmes;

(e) Regional and subregional banks;

(f) Other special arrangements;

(g) Debt relief in specific cases, particularly in Africa.

Most of these mechanisms could be utilized to finance programmes related to drought and desertification.

1. United Nations Development Programme

38. UNDP country programmes usually include important portions which target natural resource management and environmental conservation, as these were among six priority areas identified by the Governing Council in its decision 90/34. Capacity 21 is UNDP's major new initiative to support recipient countries' national capacity for implementing Agenda 21. In the many countries benefiting from UNDP programmes where drylands occur, both these programmes can support national efforts in management and conservation of resources in dry and arid areas.

2. International Development Association

39. Among the proposals presented during UNCED was the provision of an "earth increment" in the flow of ODA to the developing countries. Such an increment could be built into an increase in the level of replenishments of the International Development Association (IDA). In view of the importance placed by UNCED on drought and desertification, it is expected that a substantial portion of such an increment would be earmarked specifically for desertification control and drought-related projects and programmes. The concept of an increment implies that the funds should be additional to present levels of ODA, since the injection of environmental considerations into the global agenda requires additional expenditure and funding.

3. Global Environment Facility

40. While GEF, in its present form, is a potential source of funding for desertification and drought control activities, it is limited to activities in the four priority areas (climate change, biodiversity, international waters and ozone depletion). Land degradation issues, primarily desertification and deforestation, are eligible for financing to the extent that they relate to the focal areas of the Facility.

41. At present, the priority areas of biodiversity and climate change are those to which the issues of desertification could most likely be related. In comparison with humid and tropical regions, however, the return on investment in the arid and semi-arid zones would probably be lower than in areas with a richer biodiversity and a faster biomass growth. While further scientific study is necessary, it appears that the global impact of desertification is also discernible in areas such as atmospheric dust, soil moisture and the albedo effect, as well as in terms of migration patterns.

42. In view of these factors, it should be noted, therefore, that while GEF, as it operates currently, will address global environmental issues, it cannot as yet cover the full range of Agenda 21 provisions relating to drought and desertification. Consequently, and considering the global aspect of the problem, there were calls during the preparatory process for UNCED and at the Conference for desertification and drought to be included as a fifth priority area. This is partly reflected in chapter 33 of Agenda 21, which states that GEF is to be restructured so as to, inter alia, have sufficient flexibility to expand its scope and coverage to relevant programme areas of Agenda 21.

4. Regional banks

43. Regional banks bear a special responsibility to promote sustainable development in their respective regions. Consideration could be given to special funding arrangements for the implementation of Agenda 21 in the areas of drought and desertification. In Africa, where the impact of drought and desertification has been especially severe, UNDP and UNSO have established arrangements with the African Development Bank and the World Bank for the operation of a special facility for supporting programmes inter alia on desertification control and natural resource management in the dryland areas of the continent. It is suggested that other donors, especially bilateral assistance programmes, contribute to the strengthening and enlargement of this facility.

5 Special bilateral funds

44. A number of special bilateral funds have been established in the past, designed specifically to address problems related to drought and desertification, particularly in Africa. It is expected that in light of the importance given to these twin issues during the UNCED process, these funds will be increased in number and volume.

6. Special arrangements

45. In view of the importance of this issue to Africa, it is hoped that, in the context of the work of the intergovernmental negotiating committee (INC) for an international convention to combat desertification (see paras. 51-54), the General Assembly will explore other sources and mechanisms for resource mobilization for drought and desertification. This could include inter alia the consideration of debt relief.

B. Reinforcement of the role of regional and subregional organizations

46. It is expected that regional and subregional organizations will play a major role in the implementation of UNCED decisions and will need to be supported by Member States, as well as by the international community. Intergovernmental organizations or arrangements dealing with the issues of drought and desertification, could be envisaged in other continents.

47. National programmes of action need to be supported by, and can benefit from, regional networks of information exchange, research, training and monitoring and assessment. In this respect, Agenda 21 1/ has a provision that calls on all countries, regional, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, including the regional commissions and such organizations as COMIDES, SADCC, UMA, OSS, IGADD, ECOWAS and CILSS, to pool their resources and provide collective support to the establishment of: (a) mechanisms for regional monitoring and assessment of drought and desertification; (b) regional centres for research and training; and (c) networks of field projects that can usefully exchange information, experience and training, e.g. ecovillages, project-site seminars, etc. The recent experience of the thematic subregional cooperation in Africa and Asia showed great potential for such an approach.

48. The experience of UNSO should be used in this respect. In Africa, UNSO has been working closely with subregional organizations, particularly CILSS and IGADD, in their respective programmation and coordination activities, including support to the Sudano-Sahelian countries for the UNCED preparatory process. In the implementation of Agenda 21 provisions on drought and desertification, it is expected that UNSO will intensify its collaboration with these and other relevant regional and subregional organizations.

C. Harmonization of the efforts of United Nations agencies

49. In view of the urgent need for harmonization in ensuring the follow-up to the decisions of UNCED, the ways of ensuring a greater degree of harmonization in the efforts of the different agencies concerned in implementing chapter 12 of Agenda 21 1/ will be examined. Further, the roles and functions of mechanisms such as IAWGD and DESCON will be re-examined in the light of the decisions taken at UNCED.

50. Bearing in mind the roles expected to be played by UNDP and UNEP, it is expected that UNSO within UNDP with support from UNEP, together with the most directly concerned agencies, for example FAO, IFAD and the World Bank, will develop ways to promote joint activities and better coordination. There will also be a need to coordinate the reporting of the various agencies to the new commission on sustainable development.

D. Convention on desertification

51. Chapter 12 of Agenda 21 1/ requests the General Assembly at its forty-seventh session "to establish, under the aegis of the General Assembly, an intergovernmental negotiating committee for the elaboration of an international convention to combat desertification in those countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa, with a view to finalizing such a convention by June 1994".

52. This provision was adopted in recognition of the transboundary and global nature of the problem of desertification and considering that it requires multisectoral and multidimensional efforts involving many players. The convention would thus play an important role as a framework for better definition of policies and commitments by all partners and as a basis for mobilization of international collective efforts in this regard.

53. While the actual content of such a convention will be jointly developed by all interested countries and organizations, it is generally felt that such a convention would be useful in terms of promoting regional integration and cooperation and harmonizing national, regional and international efforts to combat desertification. The convention could further provide a programmatic framework for greater international support and assist in the development of harmonization of legislation as well as in the development of a new special programme for poverty alleviation.

54. It is expected that decisions regarding the creation of the INC mechanism as well as its schedule of work and ways and means to provide adequate funding will be made at the forty-seventh session of the General Assembly to enable the INC and any other organ of the United Nations system which will support it to proceed with its work as soon as possible in early 1993.

Notes

1/ See A/CONF.151/26, vols. I to III.

2/ UNEP/GCSS.III/3.